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ARTICLE

Tricky business: Swiss perceptions of informal imperialism in China in the 1920s

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This article analyzes the role that commercial interests played in Swiss perceptions of informal imperialism in China during the 1920s. Commercial interests were the driving force behind the establishment of Swiss relations with China in 1918 and Swiss rejections of Chinese demands to abolish extraterritoriality in the 1920s. Swiss commercial relations with China were deeply rooted in the social, economic, and political institutions and processes developed by informal imperialism in China. During the Chinese anti-foreign agitation in the 1920s, the Swiss press criticized the unequal treaties as an example of imperialism in China but ignored Switzerland's participation in it. This discrepancy between the official and media perceptions of Swiss commercial interests in China was caused by the fact that Switzerland's dependence on privileges connected to the unequal treaties clashed with Swiss national mythology, which was based on neutrality and anti-imperial narratives. Moreover, the negligible importance attributed to Swiss trade with China and the increasing focus on the nationality of foreign companies in China allowed the Swiss media to ignore Swiss commercial interests in China. As a result, Swiss complicity in informal imperialism was downplayed by the Swiss press, which ignored the importance of Swiss commerce to Sino-Swiss relations.

Keywords: unequal treaties; China; Switzerland; extraterritoriality; informal imperialism; press; commercial interests

On June 7, 1925, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), the most important liberal daily newspaper in Switzerland, printed an article about the antiforeign movement in China. The article described how foreigners controlled the police force and courts in large parts of Shanghai, despite the fact that they only formed a tiny fraction of Shanghai's population. It criticized extraterritoriality as having been forced upon China by the foreign powers and described the situation as "very problematic."¹ Two weeks later, the NZZ printed another article in which it argued:

[The cause of the current conflict] can ultimately be found in the fact that the foreigners in all the Chinese treaty ports enjoy large and important privileges compared to the Chinese, and these privileges have risen in some 'concessionary areas' to full-fledged judicial extraterritoriality.²

The NZZ argued emphatically that the only way the situation could be improved in the long term was if the foreign powers relinquished their obsolete privileges, extraterritoriality, and the concessions, which had been forced upon China with brutal violence. If this

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¹ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (hereafter NZZ), June 7, 1925.

² NZZ, June 21, 1925.

was not done, the article warned, China would resort to brutal violence until the powers gave up their privileges.³

Such a critical view of the privileges enjoyed by foreigners in China is not what one would expect from the most prominent newspaper advocating Swiss trade in China. Swiss commercial interests were not mentioned and neither were the views of Swiss companies and businessmen about extraterritoriality. Yet, as this article will demonstrate, commercial interests in China were the driving force behind both the establishment of Swiss relations with China and Swiss rejections of Chinese demands to abolish extraterritoriality in the 1920s.

During the Chinese antiforeign agitation in the 1920s, most Swiss newspapers and magazines harshly criticized the unequal treaties as an example of imperialism in China, seemingly oblivious to the fact that extraterritoriality was of huge importance for the Swiss government and for Swiss businessmen in China.⁴ By analyzing the discrepancy between the Swiss government's insistence on Switzerland's status as a power with extraterritoriality in China and the Swiss media's criticism of the unequal treaties, this article demonstrates that commercial interests played a crucial part in this problem because of their connection to the unequal treaties in China.

This article follows John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson's definition of informal imperialism to describe the political and economic control that was achieved by the foreign powers in China through gunboat diplomacy, trade, loans, and investment.⁵ Beginning with the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, the unequal treaties that were forced upon China gave foreign nations privileges such as extraterritoriality, control over territorial enclaves, administrative control over revenue-collecting agencies, a customs tariff rate of 5 percent ad valorem, the right for missionaries to proselytize and establish schools and universities, and the right to station troops in China. Nevertheless, as Jürgen Osterhammel has pointed out, each power's imperial presence in China had specific sectoral, institutional, spatial, and diachronic dimensions.⁶ While Chinese foreign relations in the 1920s and the issue of the unequal treaties have been analyzed in detail,⁷ the case of Switzerland adds a new dimension to this subject by showing that the issue of commercial interests in China and their dependence on privileges connected to the unequal treaties were extremely problematic for a neutral country.

This article is structured in four parts, namely (1) the influence of Swiss economic interests on diplomatic relations with China until the early 1920s, (2) the antiforeign agitation in China and its effects on Swiss commerce, (3) media portrayals of Swiss interests in China during the antiforeign agitation in the 1920s, and (4) reasons for the discrepancy between the importance of commerce in political relations and media portrayals. The article focuses on the period 1923–1927 because by 1928 most antiforeign agitation had subsided, and the Nanjing Government under Chiang Kai-shek had been

³ *NZZ*, June 21, 1925.

⁴ Knüsel, *Framing China*, 117–125.

⁵ Gallagher and Robinson, "Imperialism of Free Trade," 1–15. For critics of Robinson and Gallagher, see Louis, *Imperialism*.

⁶ There is no agreement about the definition of the term "unequal treaties" or the specific number of unequal treaties that were made between China and the foreign powers. See Wang, "Discourse of Unequal Treaties," 400–402, 418–419; Fung, "Chinese Nationalists," 795–798; Osterhammel, "Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire," 290–314; and Mclean, "Finance and 'Informal Empire,'" 291–305.

⁷ Fung, "Chinese Nationalists"; Murdock, "Exploiting Anti-Imperialism," 65–95; Kirby, "The Internationalization of China," 433–458; Wang, "Discourse of Unequal Treaties"; Zhou, *Exterritorialitätsrechte*; Rigby, *May 30 Movement*; Ku, "Urban Mass Movement," 197–216; Osterhammel, *Shanghai*; Ristaino, *China's Art of Revolution*; Leutner et al., *The Chinese Revolution*; Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution*; Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain*; and Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire*.

established, which adopted a different policy against the foreign powers, focusing more on tariff control than on extraterritoriality.⁸

I. Commercial interests and Sino–Swiss relations

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, economic organizations exerted a profound influence on Swiss politics. As a consequence, Swiss foreign relations were greatly influenced by the interests of the Swiss export industry.⁹ This can also be observed in the decisive role that commercial interests played in Sino–Swiss relations. An official Swiss trading agency was established in Shanghai in 1912 after consistent lobbying by Swiss business organizations, which argued that a Swiss commercial emissary was necessary to negotiate or mediate business transactions in order to boost Swiss trade with China.¹⁰ In 1914, the Swiss Federal Council toyed with the idea of closing the agency. However, Swiss business organizations and the Swiss representative in Tokyo, Ferdinand von Salis, intervened, and the Federal Council agreed to open a consulate in China after the First World War. Negotiations between Switzerland and China began in 1917, and in 1918 a treaty of friendship between Switzerland and the Republic of China was signed.¹¹

As the Chinese government urgently wanted a mission in Switzerland, it was willing to include an annex in the treaty that granted Switzerland the most-favored-nation clause with respect to extraterritoriality. Switzerland in return promised to relinquish extraterritoriality once China had reformed its judicial system. The most-favored-nation clause also entitled Swiss merchants to pay a tariff of only 5 percent on Swiss goods exported to China.¹² In her study of Swiss extraterritoriality in China, Yufang Zhou argues that the Sino–Swiss treaty could be classified from a legal point of view as an unequal treaty. However, Zhou also points out that Swiss privileges did not extend to the same degree as those of Britain, France, and some of the other foreign nations. For example, Switzerland had no concessions in China and no troops stationed there.¹³

Anti-imperial nationalism had existed in China since the late nineteenth century,¹⁴ but it received a boost after the First World War, when the abolition of the unequal treaties became the focus of Chinese nationalism. At the Peace Conference in Versailles in 1919, Chinese delegates tried in vain to achieve the abolition of extraterritoriality and the uniform tariff. During the Washington Conference (1921–1922),

⁸ Fung, “Chinese Nationalists,” 808–809.

⁹ Müller, “Einleitung,” 333; Schmid, *Wirtschaft*, 83–85; and Witschi, *Schweizer auf imperialistischen Pfaden*, 188–192.

¹⁰ Max Huber, “Bericht über die Möglichkeit der Förderung schweizerischen Exports nach China,” November 1901, Feder Archives, Berne, Switzerland (hereafter BAR) E 2001 A 1000/45 978; “Schreiben des Handelsdepartements an den Bundesrat,” December 6, 1911, BAR E 2001 A 1000/45 1350; “Auszug aus dem Protokoll der Sitzung des Schweizerischen Bundesrates,” July 10, 1914, BAR E 2001 A 1000/45; *Journal de Genève*, February 4, 1912; and *Berner Intelligenzblatt*, December 21, 1911. See also: Zhou, *Extraterritorialitätsrechte*, 49–50; and Steinmann, *Seldwyla im Wunderland*, 72–73.

¹¹ “Protokoll der Sitzung des Schweizerischen Bundesrates,” January 20, 1914, BAR E 2001A 1000/45 1055; “Auszug aus dem Protokoll der Sitzung des Schweizerischen Bundesrates,” July 10, 1914, BAR E 2001 A 1000/45 1350. See also: Zhou, *Extraterritorialitätsrechte*, 81–97.

¹² “Der Chef der Abteilung für Auswärtiges des Politischen Departementes, P. Dinichert, an den schweizerischen Geschäftsträger in Washington, Gesandtschaftssekretär A. Girardet,” August 12, 1925, in Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Diplomatiques Suisses, 80–81.

¹³ Zhou, *Extraterritorialitätsrechte*, 105–106.

¹⁴ Osterhammel, *Shanghai*, 115.

the unequal treaties were also described as unjust by Chinese delegates, but instead of abrogating extraterritoriality, the Nine Power Treaty of March 6, 1922 confirmed the Open Door Policy and only stated that extraterritoriality would eventually be abolished.¹⁵

The increasing importance that the Chinese government placed upon the abrogation of the unequal treaties in the early 1920s affected relations between Switzerland and China. Since extraterritoriality was only mentioned in the appendix to the Sino-Swiss treaty of friendship, Switzerland was excluded from the Washington Conference and later from the Customs Tariff Conference.¹⁶ Moreover, in 1923, the Chinese parliament reviewed the treaty of friendship between Switzerland and China but rejected consular jurisdiction for Switzerland, which had been in effect since Switzerland had opened its Consulate General in Shanghai in 1921.¹⁷ This was fairly typical of the Chinese government's behavior towards the foreign powers after the Washington Conference, because the Chinese government decided against taking on all foreign powers at once and instead tried to persuade individual powers to renegotiate treaties, claiming that they were invalid. The treaty with Switzerland seems to have been singled out for particular scrutiny by the Chinese government because it was China's last treaty that granted consular jurisdiction and extraterritoriality.¹⁸

The Swiss government rejected China's demands for renegotiation in 1924 and the Swiss Consul General, Johan Lukas Isler, continued to administer justice in Shanghai. Nevertheless, the Chinese demands for treaty revision were taken so seriously in Berne that in 1925 the Head of the Division of Foreign Affairs, Paul Dinichert, ordered the Swiss Minister in Paris, Alphonse Dunant, to ask the French government as a precautionary measure if it would be willing to protect Swiss nationals in China in case the Chinese government actually hindered Swiss consuls in Shanghai and Canton from administering justice.¹⁹ After the French government replied that it would not be able to do so for all Swiss nationals in China, the Division of Foreign Affairs asked the Swiss representative in Berlin, Hermann Karl Rüfenacht, about the German experience of giving up extraterritoriality in China and having to rely on Chinese tribunals. Rüfenacht's report was fairly positive and was promptly forwarded

¹⁵ "Der Verweser des schweizerischen Generalkonsulates in Shanghai, F. Kästli, an den Chef der Abteilung für Auswärtiges des Politischen Departementes, P. Dinichert," August 4, 1925, BAR E 2001 (C) 1/18, Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Diplomatiques Suisses, 121–122. See also: Fung, "Chinese Nationalists"; Buckley, *The United States*; Wright, "The Washington Conference"; and Miller, *Populist Nationalism*, 109–110, 127–139.

¹⁶ "Der Verweser des schweizerischen Generalkonsulates in Shanghai, F. Kästli, an den Chef der Abteilung für Auswärtiges des Politischen Departementes, P. Dinichert," August 4, 1925, Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Diplomatiques Suisses, 121–122. See also Zhou, *Exterritorialitätsrechte*, 118, 126–129.

¹⁷ "Der Chef der Abteilung für Auswärtiges des Politischen Departementes, P. Dinichert, an den schweizerischen Gesandten in Paris, A. Dunant," March 13, 1925, Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Diplomatiques Suisse, 25–27.

¹⁸ "Der schweizerische Gesandte in Paris, A. Dunant, an den Vorsteher des Politischen Departementes, G. Motta," March 17, 1925, BAR E 2001 (B) 6/5, Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Diplomatiques Suisses, 30.

¹⁹ "Der Chef der Abteilung für Auswärtiges des Politischen Departementes, P. Dinichert, an den schweizerischen Gesandten in Paris, A. Dunant," March 13, 1925, Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Diplomatiques Suisses, 25–27; and "Der chinesische Gesandte in Bern, Tsent-Tsiang Lou, an den Vorsteher des Politischen Departementes, G. Motta," February 7, 1925, Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Diplomatiques Suisses, 12–13.

to Isler in Shanghai for his opinion on the matter.²⁰ However, Isler flat out rejected any changes, claiming that China had neither a constitutional government nor a parliament and that Chinese courts were incapable of administering justice according to modern law.²¹

Interestingly, the issue of trade figured prominently in Isler's reply. The consul general stated emphatically that the abolition of extraterritoriality would have a negative effect on Swiss commerce with China, pointing out that extraterritoriality had been crucial for the development of Swiss commerce in China because it had settled the previously uncertain position of Swiss merchants. Isler concluded:

For the development of Swiss commerce and the security of its agents, the continuation of extraterritoriality is a primordial advantage, and I do not hesitate at all to say that, with the exception of a few missionaries who have other interests, all our compatriots in China oppose energetically any modification of the existing state.²²

Isler's reply is surprising given the insignificant role that the China market played for the Swiss economy. Between 1919 and 1927, imports from China amounted to less than 0.7 percent of total Swiss imports and exports to China to less than 1.6 percent of total Swiss exports (see Figure 1). The most important Swiss exports to China included pocket watches and wristwatches, indigo, silk, and satin stitch embroidery. These were typical of Switzerland's exports in the 1920s, with watches and products from the chemical industry as leading export products, followed by textiles and machines.²³

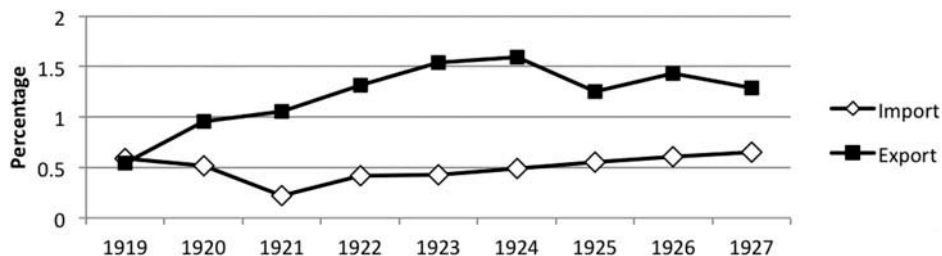


Figure 1. Swiss trade with China as percentage of total Swiss trade, 1919–1927.²⁴

²⁰ “Der schweizerische Gesandte in Paris, A. Dunant, an den Vorsteher des Politischen Departementes, G. Motta,” March 17, 1925, BAR E 2001 (B) 6/5, Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Diplomatiques Suisses, 30; and “Der Chef der Abteilung für Auswärtiges des Politischen Departementes, P. Dinichert, an den schweizerischen Generalkonsul in Shanghai, J. L. Isler,” April 28, 1925, Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Diplomatiques Suisses, 50–51.

²¹ “Der schweizerische Generalkonsul in Shanghai, J. L. Isler, an den Chef der Abteilung für Auswärtiges des Politischen Departementes, P. Dinichert,” July 14, 1925, Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Diplomatiques Suisses, 104–106.

²² Ibid.

²³ Müller, “Einleitung,” 322–323.

²⁴ Data taken from: Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1919*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1920*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1921*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1922*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1923*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1924*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1925*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1926*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1927*.

A series of reports written by Friedrich Kästli, a member of the staff of the Swiss Consulate in Shanghai, reveals how the consulate tried to foster Swiss commercial interests in China in the 1920s. In 1923, Kästli wrote seven reports for Swiss companies interested in doing business in China. The reports were written for publication in the *Schweizerisches Handelsamtsblatt*, the official publication of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs' Division of Trade. In the reports, Kästli explained that business in China was different from that in other countries and gave detailed advice on the successful organization of a business venture in China. Kästli often referred to the Chinese in the reports using the singular label "der Chinese", which carries a similar meaning to "the Chinaman". This derogatory label was common because of the Orientalist perspective pervasive amongst foreigners in China.²⁵ Nevertheless, it is striking because Kästli referred to other nationals in the plural, only the Chinese were described in the singular, implying that all Chinese could be reduced to specific characteristics. The focus on the cultural and/or racial difference of the Chinese can also be seen in various references in Kästli's reports on the inferior Chinese intellectual capacity as compared to that of foreigners. For example, Kästli repeatedly suggested that companies send actual models of their goods to China, not just catalogues or pamphlets with illustrations of them, since "plain brochures are of little use for the Chinaman because he can neither understand the illustrations nor the text, particularly if the latter are in English."²⁶

The consulate also actively supported Swiss companies exporting goods to China by publishing bulletins in which it sought agents for such products as watches, machinery, chemical and pharmaceutical products, and even such famously Swiss staples as chocolate or "Gruyere cheese (without crust) in cardboard boxes and tins."²⁷ By 1924, however, Kästli's reports about Swiss trade with China had grown increasingly glum because of the ongoing fighting between the various Chinese warlords. In September 1924, Kästli noted rather dejectedly:

It is evident that the business situation is suffering seriously from the consequences of the current civil war [...] new orders are practically impossible to obtain and if the Chinese have any opportunity to cancel existing orders under any pretence or refuse arriving goods, they will not let this opportunity pass by.²⁸

II. Chinese antiforeign agitation and Swiss trade

As Kästli increasingly saw his hopes for Swiss trade in China dashed, the situation deteriorated even further once the May Thirtieth Movement broke out. In the mid-

²⁵ For Orientalism see Said, *Orientalism*.

²⁶ Kästli, "Zur wirtschaftlichen Erschliessung Chinas. (Organisation und Technik des Imports nach China)," June E 1923, BAR E 2300 1000/716_431 (quote); Kästli, untitled report, January 22, 1923, BAR E 2300 1000/716_431; Kästli, "Zur Wirtschaftlichen Erschliessung Chinas. (Die Waehrungsverhaeltnisse in China)," February 1923, BAR E 2300 1000/716_431; Kästli, "Zur wirtschaftlichen Erschliessung Chinas. (Die Finanzlage der Chinesischen Republik)," March 1923, BAR E 2300 1000/716_431; Kästli, "Zur wirtschaftlichen Erschliessung Chinas. Der Uhrenmarkt in China," April 1923, BAR E 2300 1000/716_431; Kästli, "Zur Wirtschaftlichen Erschliessung Chinas. (Organisation und Technik des Imports nach China)," undated (1923), BAR E 2300 1000/716_431; and Kästli, "Zur Wirtschaftlichen Erschliessung Chinas. (Organisation und Technik des Imports nach China)," December 1923, BAR E 2300 1000/716_431.

²⁷ Swiss Consulate Shanghai, Bulletins from April 1923, October 1923, and March 1924 (quote), BAR E 2300 1000/716_431.

²⁸ Kästli, "Vertraulicher Bericht ueber die politischen, militaerischen und wirtschaftlichen Zustaende in der Republik China waehrend des Buergerkrieges 1924," September 1924, BAR E 2300 1000/716_431.

1920s, various political actors and groups utilized the unequal treaties to legitimize their political ambitions and to mobilize the Chinese population. These groups included the Guomindang (GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party, which formed a United Front between 1924 and 1927.²⁹ In the early 1920s, antiforeign agitation was mostly limited to demonstrations and strikes in foreign-owned textile factories. In June 1925, however, the May Thirtieth Movement unleashed a wave of riots, boycotts of foreign goods, and strikes and demonstrations against the foreign powers and the unequal treaties across China.³⁰

The May Thirtieth Movement broke out in Shanghai, which had been opened to foreign trade as a treaty port in 1842. Informal imperialism in Shanghai led to a situation described by Jürgen Osterhammel as *imperium in imperio* (state within a state).³¹ Although foreigners represented only 3.5 percent of the population in Shanghai's French Concession and the International Settlement, all nine members of the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC) were foreigners. The SMC formulated its own laws and taxes, and it had its own police force and court.³² After the outbreak of the May Thirtieth Movement, negotiations between demonstrators and the SMC focused on the abrogation of the privileges connected to the unequal treaties and resulted in the agreement that Shanghai's Mixed Court was to be abolished by the end of 1926 and that three seats on the SMC were to be reserved for Chinese councilors. The foreign powers also agreed to restore control over the customs to China by January 1929. Extraterritoriality and other privileges of foreigners in China, however, remained intact.³³

By 1927, antiforeign agitation orchestrated by the GMD and the Chinese Communist Party as well as Comintern agents had caused relations between the GMD and the foreign powers to deteriorate to such a degree that Chiang Kai-shek organized a coup in April 1927. This severely weakened leftwing leaders of the GMD's Central Executive Committee in Wuhan who continued to call for anti-imperial agitation and unilateral abrogation of the unequal treaties. The coup also resulted in the arrest, torture, and execution of thousands of alleged Communists across China. Chiang established the Nationalist government in Nanjing and expelled the Communists from the GMD in July 1927.³⁴

²⁹ "ECCI Resolution on the Relations between the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang," in Degras, *The Communist International*, 5–6. See also: Wang, "Discourse of Unequal Treaties"; Elleman, "Soviet Diplomacy," 450–480; Murdock, "Exploiting Anti-Imperialism," 69–88; Fung, "Chinese Nationalists," 799–800; Luk, *Origins of Chinese Bolshevism*; and Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution*, 5–14.

³⁰ *Documents on the Shanghai Case*; "Report on the Hong Kong–Canton Strike, March 1926," in Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, 594–596; Woodhead, *China Year Book 1926–7*, 268; and Woodhead, *China Yearbook 1928*, 942–951, 965. See also: Murdock, "Exploiting Anti-Imperialism"; Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain*, 5 and 13–14; Rigby, *The May 30 Movement*; Ku, "Urban Mass Movement," 197–203, 207; Osterhammel, *Shanghai*, 12–18; Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution*, 21–23; and Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire*, 9–10.

³¹ Osterhammel, *Shanghai*, 9.

³² Ibid., 7–12; Bickers, "Shanghaianders," 168–169; Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire*, 21–22; and Lockwood, "International Settlement at Shanghai," 1033–1034.

³³ Osterhammel, *Shanghai*, 18–22.

³⁴ Woodhead, *China Year Book 1928*, 723–725; Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*; *Manchester Guardian*, April 12, 14, 1927; *The Times* (London), April 7, 1927. See also: Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution*, 92, 96–97, 103–111; Martin, "The Green Gang," 64–92; Trampedach, "Chiang Kaishek," 128–132; and Fung, "Chinese Nationalists," 803–804.

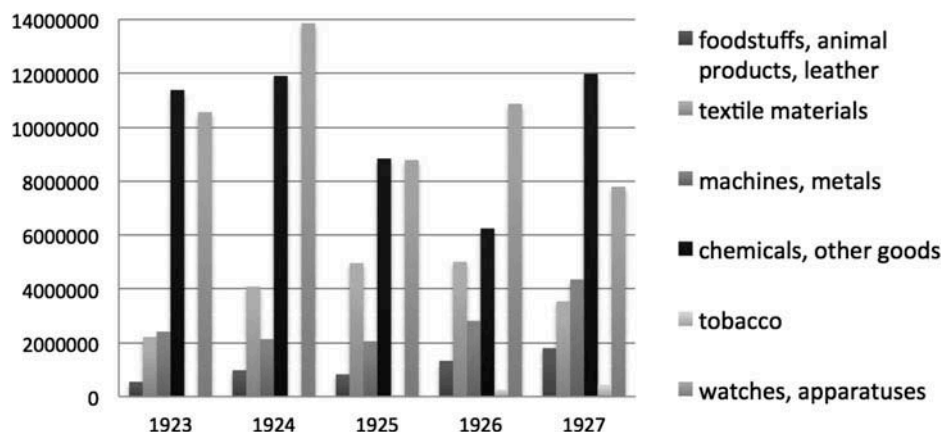


Figure 2. Swiss exports to China in Swiss francs, 1923–1927.³⁵

While the antiforeign agitation in China between 1925 and 1927 had a devastating effect on trade with countries like Britain,³⁶ it did not greatly affect Swiss trade with China. Although exports in 1925 amounted to CHF 7,507,000 less than the previous year (exports in 1924 to China totaled CHF 32,975,000 and in 1925 totaled CHF 25,468,000), they did not fall further (see Figure 2).³⁷ Swiss exports to China suffered mainly because less indigo was exported to China. As many textile factory workers went on strike and British factories had problems selling their wares because of the boycott, there was less demand for indigo, which was used for coloring textiles.

The export of watches to China also dropped drastically after 1924. Despite Kästli's claim in 1923 that 99 percent of the Chinese were illiterate and had no use for dials, watches were among the best-selling Swiss products in China. Swiss companies exported gold, nickel, and silver pocket and wristwatches to China. Most people who bought the expensive watches were foreigners living in China because the large majority of Chinese could not afford them, opting instead for cheap nickel watches.³⁸ Since many businesses incurred serious losses during the boycott, fewer people would have had the money to buy those watches.

Overall, Swiss imports from China continued to rise between 1924 and 1927, but there were some exceptions. Imports from China were dominated by textile materials, primarily silk. While the May Thirtieth Movement included strikes in textile factories, Swiss imports from China decreased only slightly in 1926 and increased again in 1927. Foodstuff imports from China, however, decreased in 1925 and 1926 and only reached

³⁵ Remer and Palmer, *Study of Chinese Boycotts*, 111–113, 119–122, 127; Woodhead, *China Year Book 1928*, 900; Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, 44–89; Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain*, 18; Rigby, *The May 30 Movement*, 142–146; and See, “Alone against the Waking Dragon,” 175–176.

³⁶ Data taken from: Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1924*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1925*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1926*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1927*.

³⁷ Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1924*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1925*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1926*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1927*.

³⁸ Kästli, “Zur wirtschaftlichen Erschliessung Chinas. Der Uhrenmarkt in China,” April 30, 1923, BAR E 2300 1000/716_431.

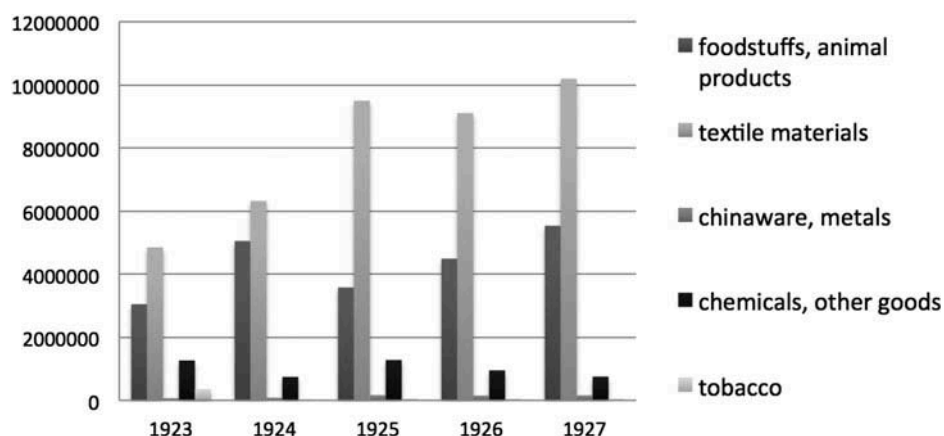


Figure 3. Swiss imports from China in Swiss francs, 1923–1927.³⁹

the level of 1924 again in 1927 (see Figure 3). The negligible impact that trade with China had on the Swiss economy in the 1920s is at odds with the importance that the Swiss government and the Swiss consulate in Shanghai accorded to commercial interests in China whenever they discussed Swiss China policies. Even more interestingly, however, the media completely ignored this aspect, as the next section shows.

III. Commercial interests and extraterritoriality in media portrayals

For the analysis of the media's description of Swiss interests in China, publications were selected that represent a variety of socioeconomic profiles in their readerships. They were also among the publications with the highest circulation in order to ensure that they represent widespread views and media discourse. The following publications were analyzed: *NZZ* (a liberal newspaper from Zurich with national circulation), *Tages-Anzeiger* (a newspaper with an officially neutral, general readership from Zurich also with national circulation), *Gazette de Lausanne* (a liberal–democrat newspaper from Lausanne), *Journal de Genève* (a liberal newspaper from Geneva), *Luzerner Tagblatt* (a conservative newspaper from Lucerne), *Schweizer Illustrierte Zeitung* (a weekly publication with general readership and national circulation), and *Nebelspalter* (a satirical magazine with national circulation). In 1925, the events in China were not covered in great detail in the Swiss press. Instead, the foreign news section of Swiss newspapers covered primarily events in European countries as well as international events like the negotiations at Locarno.⁴⁰ In 1927, events in China received much more media attention than in the previous years.⁴¹ However, the framing of the events in China did not change between 1925 and 1927.

In the 1920s, Swiss newspapers had no foreign correspondents in China. The only newspaper with a contact in China who constantly supplied articles was the *Journal de*

³⁹ Data taken from: Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1923*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1924*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1925*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1926*; Eidgenössische Oberzolldirektion, *Statistik des Warenverkehrs 1927*.

⁴⁰ Kamber, “Medienereignishierarchien,” 374.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 376.

Genève, which printed articles from Philippe de Vargas who taught history and ecclesiastical history at Yenching University in Beijing.⁴² All publications predominantly relied on British newspapers and the news agencies Reuters and Havas. British press portrayals of the antiforeign agitation in China were influenced by three factors: firstly, the fact that British trade with China suffered tremendously from the antiforeign agitation; secondly, the effects of anticommunist hysteria in Britain; and thirdly, the conservative nature of most British newspapers. As a result, a majority of the British press portrayed events in China as having been orchestrated by the Soviet Union or the Comintern with the aim of weakening Britain's position in China.⁴³

Many Swiss newspapers explicitly distanced themselves from this view and stated that nationalism was more important than Bolshevik agitation as the driving force behind the movement.⁴⁴ While newspapers like the *Tages-Anzeiger* or the *NZZ* outright rejected the notion of Soviet responsibility, commentaries in the *Journal de Genève* and particularly the *Gazette de Lausanne* did so less vehemently.⁴⁵ This can be explained by the fact that anticommunism was stronger in the French-speaking part of Switzerland because of the presence of anticommunist patriotic organizations and because many Russians had emigrated there after the October Revolution and were vocal in their hostility towards Communism.⁴⁶ The right-wing hardliner Maurice Muret, for example, regularly wrote in the *Gazette de Lausanne* about the events in China. In one of his articles, he warned his readers of the consequences of a Communist China: "A Bolshevik and anti-Christian China would constitute an extremely grave menace for the Occident and occidental civilization."⁴⁷

Nevertheless, even publications that relied on the Red Menace to portray events in China also used other frames. While many newspapers and magazines argued that the antiforeign incidents were a result of the civil war raging in China and that they would not have happened otherwise,⁴⁸ the dominant frame for the antiforeign agitation was anti-imperialism. A typical view was the *Tages-Anzeiger*'s argument in March 1927 that the real cause of the antiforeign sentiment in China was the policy of the imperial powers.⁴⁹ The *Luzerner Tagblatt*, in turn, accused the foreigners in China of having lost "moral and judicial responsibility" because they had lived for such a long time with the privileges granted in the unequal treaties,⁵⁰ and it expressed sympathy for the movement because of the appalling working conditions in Chinese textile factories and mines.⁵¹ Philippe de Vargas also dedicated various articles in the *Journal de Genève* to the unequal treaties as the cause of the May Thirtieth Movement. In a long article he listed paragraph after paragraph of examples showing how the privileges enjoyed by the foreign powers exploited China's political and legal system as well as its economy and society. He concluded:

⁴² Ziehr, "Vargas," vol. 6, 416.

⁴³ Knüsel, "British Conservatives," 62–92.

⁴⁴ *Journal de Genève*, June 17, 1925, July 3, 1925; *NZZ*, June 7, 10, 11, 21, 27, 1925, March 26, 1927; *Schweizer Illustrierte Zeitung*, July 9, 1925; *Tages-Anzeiger*, June 10, 1925, March 23, 1927, June 11, 1925, June 21, 1925, July 27, 1925; and *Luzerner Tagblatt*, June 13, 1925, July 11, 1925.

⁴⁵ See for example *Journal de Genève*, June 26, 1925 and July 4, 1925.

⁴⁶ Dreyer, *Schweizer Kreuz und Sowjetstern*, 92.

⁴⁷ *Gazette de Lausanne*, July 28, 1925; see also June 9, 15, 25, 1925, July 6, 28, 1925.

⁴⁸ *NZZ*, April 21, 1927; *Schweizer Illustrierte Zeitung*, February 17, 1927, April 1, 1927, April 14, 1927, April 21, 1927; *Journal de Genève*, June 18, 1925; and *Tages-Anzeiger*, April 7, 1927.

⁴⁹ *Tages-Anzeiger*, March 23, 1927.

⁵⁰ *Luzerner Tagblatt*, June 13, 1925.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, July 11, 1925.

Of course, the Russians are doing everything they can to develop the situation to their profit. On the other hand, it is also very natural that all commercial and industrial interests that thrive because of the privileged situation of foreigners are trying to foment European public opinion by crying Bolshevik wolf. But this is to be blind to the real situation... which is the result of an erroneous policy of an entire century and a superiority complex of the white race which is neither justified by the precepts of Christianity nor by the teachings of history.⁵²

Various newspapers also argued that the antiforeign movement was in fact a nationalist movement.⁵³ The *Luzerner Tagblatt* printed several articles in which it described the different aspects of informal imperialism in China and stated: "the smallest microstate would not tolerate foreign meddling in domestic affairs anymore the way the largest empire of the world is still tolerating it."⁵⁴ The most vigorous denunciation of imperialism in China, however, was published in the *Schweizer Illustrierte Zeitung*: "Like the indigenous population in India and North Africa, the country [China] is struggling to liberate itself from the oppressing slave chains of the white powers."⁵⁵ The choice of vocabulary is very interesting here. The magazine defined the perpetrators as "the white powers," but by 1925 Japan was the most dominant foreign power in China, not least in terms of foreign nationals and businesses. The description of informal imperialism in China as "oppressing slave chains" also shows that the magazine wanted to take a stand against imperialism rather than just analyze the situation in China.

Between 1925 and 1927, Swiss publications overwhelmingly showed great sympathy for the antiforeign movement in China. The following excerpt from the *NZZ* shows how this was connected to criticism of the behavior of foreign powers in China:

The Chinese have experienced often enough that one cannot achieve much with a gentle manner. As long as the foreign powers did not feel a strong pressure or even threats, they showed no hurry whatsoever in granting even the most pressing Chinese demands, which had been acknowledged as justified by everybody. Thus, they have trifled away any entitlement for patience.⁵⁶

Between 1925 and 1927 the magazine *Nebelspalter* printed various cartoons and texts that commented gleefully on the antiforeign movement in China, often making fun of the situation of businessmen in China.⁵⁷ One such cartoon was entitled "Driving the foreigners out of China" (Figure 4).⁵⁸ It depicts three white men wearing suits and top hats being blown away from China. The caption below the illustration states: "Dear God, we did not expect such a headwind." The three men are wearing the attire of businessmen, and their pockets seem to be full of money, which is implied by the various bills that are floating around them. Their interest in China is, therefore, portrayed as strictly commercial. Moreover, the sarcastic tone of the cartoon is clearly mocking the failure of Western businessmen in China.

In light of the media's awareness of the complicity of foreign businessmen in informal imperialism in China, it is interesting that Swiss trade with China was not discussed by Swiss

⁵² *Journal de Genève*, June 24, 1925; see also July 30, 1924.

⁵³ *Gazette de Lausanne*, June 20, 1925; *NZZ*, June 10, 21, 1925, July 5, 1925, March 22, 1927; *Luzerner Tagblatt*, July 11, 13, 1925; *Tages-Anzeiger*, June 29, 1925; and *Journal de Genève*, July 3, 1925.

⁵⁴ *Luzerner Tagblatt*, June 6, 1925 and July 11, 1925 (quote).

⁵⁵ *Schweizer Illustrierte Zeitung*, June 18, 1925.

⁵⁶ *NZZ*, March 22, 1927.

⁵⁷ *Nebelspalter*, August 7, 1925, April 29, 1927, March 15, 1927, June 17, 1927.

⁵⁸ Peter Bachmann, "Driving the foreigners out of China".

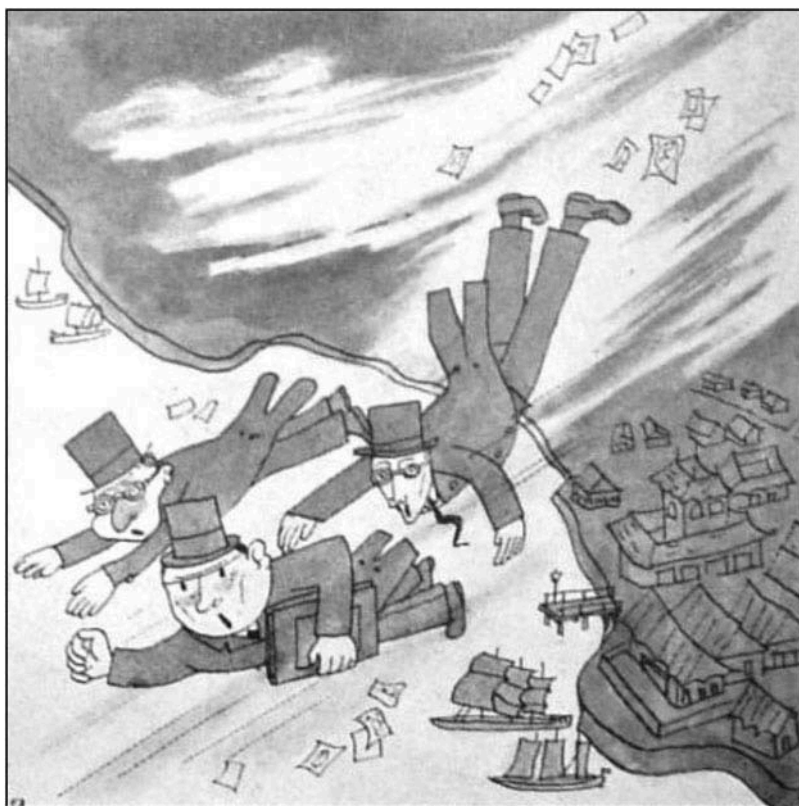


Figure 4. “Driving the foreigners out of China” by Peter Bachmann, *Nebelspalter* (April 29, 1927).

publications, despite the May Thirtieth Movement’s effects on Swiss trade with China and the importance the Swiss government attributed to commercial interests in China. It is also remarkable that the Swiss press ignored the fact that Switzerland was among the countries that had been granted the most-favored-nation clause, and that Swiss citizens and businesses in China profited from the privileges that were granted to Switzerland because of this clause. Instead, most publications gave the impression that Switzerland had no interests in China whatsoever. The exception was the *Tages-Anzeiger*, which stated in an article that Swiss nationals in China had been entitled to extraterritoriality since 1918 and explained in detail what this actually meant. The newspaper then reminded its readers that the events in China and their effects on extraterritoriality should be of interest to Switzerland as well.⁵⁹ Yet, the *Tages-Anzeiger* also stated in another article: “It is quite a relief for Switzerland that the Chinese bear no hatred for our compatriots.”⁶⁰ The view that Switzerland was not part of the foreign presence in China can also be seen in various articles where publications described the May Thirtieth Movement as a struggle in which China was fighting against Britain, the United States, Japan, and the Soviet Union.⁶¹ Switzerland did not figure in these portrayals as one of the foreign powers.

⁵⁹ *Tages-Anzeiger*, June 22, 1925.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, June 26, 1925.

⁶¹ *NZZ*, July 31, 1925 and March 22, 1927; *Tages-Anzeiger*, June 29, 1925; and *Nebelspalter*, November 27, 1925 and May 13, 1927.

It is extremely puzzling that the press did not regard Switzerland as part of the powers complicit in informal imperialism in China. The explanation that Switzerland was unique among the foreign powers in China because it had no sphere of interest is invalid because countries like the United States did not have a sphere of influence either. The 429 Swiss citizens who lived in China in 1925 were part of the foreign community in China, which was protected by extraterritoriality and whose businesses profited from the same low taxes and duties as all the other foreign powers. They lived in foreign concessions and were protected by foreign police. The Swiss expatriates in China joined foreign clubs in the expat communities and some even participated in the volunteer corps that defended the French Concession in Shanghai in 1927.⁶²

The negative portrayal of extraterritoriality by the Swiss press and the denunciation of other nations that were unwilling to abolish it is also hypocritical when one keeps in mind that Switzerland was the last country to be granted extraterritorial privileges by China in 1918⁶³ and one of the last European countries that agreed to relinquish it in 1946.⁶⁴ Extraterritoriality was clearly of much greater importance to the Swiss government and Swiss expatriates in China than Swiss newspapers sought to make their readers believe. This raises the question of why Swiss editors so adamantly downplayed the issue.

IV. National narratives and media portrayals of China

The fact that so many Swiss magazines and newspapers used the antiforeign agitation in China to criticize foreign imperialism in China is perplexing because of Switzerland's participation in it. Moreover, using imperialism to frame the stories about the events in China required the suppression of any accounts about the involvement of Swiss companies in the transnational networks that participated in informal imperialism in China. This was easier in the 1920s than before the First World War.

As Christof Dejung and Andreas Zangger have pointed out, until the early twentieth century, the nationality of global business companies was of very little importance because free trade dominated international commerce. During this "period of economic cosmopolitanism,"⁶⁵ Swiss trading companies in Asia not only had trading partners from various other countries, but employees of the multinational trading houses also had diverse national backgrounds. Swiss merchant houses built trading networks across Asia and were able to establish quite a strong presence in the import and export business in Asia.⁶⁶ Swiss participation in the transnational imperial networks of commerce and trade meant that even though Switzerland did not possess colonies, it nevertheless profited from imperial structures and networks.⁶⁷ Global economic warfare during the First World War, however, made the nationality of

⁶² "Protokoll der Sitzung des Bundesrates vom 31. März 1927," March 31, 1927, Commission nationale pour la publication de Documents Suisses, 489–490; and Woodhead, *China Year Book 1928*, 4.

⁶³ "Freundschaftsvertrag zwischen der Schweiz und der Republik China," *Bundesblatt* 52, no. 5 (1918), 657–659. See also: Zhou, *Exterritorialitätsrechte*, 20–40, 63–66.

⁶⁴ Coduri, *La Suisse*, 50–53.

⁶⁵ Dejung and Zangger, "British Wartime Protectionism," 182.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 181–213. For an overview of the historiography, see Dejung, "Unbekannte Intermediäre," 139–142. For the development of Swiss trade in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Iselin, Lüthi, and Sebastian, *Der schweizerische Grosshandel*, 104–135.

⁶⁷ David and Etemad, "Gibt es einen schweizerischen Imperialismus?" 19–21. For Swiss economic opportunism in different locations, see Stucki, *Das heimliche Imperium*; and Witschi, *Schweizer auf imperialistischen Pfaden*.

businesses much more important.⁶⁸ It is, therefore, possible that the Swiss press did not view Swiss businesses in China as part of an imperial network of commerce but as nationally distinctive business entities, which were not complicit in any transnational imperial networks.

This perception was helped by the small role that trade with China played in the Swiss economy. Swiss exports went mostly to European nations in the early twentieth century.⁶⁹ Moreover, in 1925 there were only 25 Swiss companies in China.⁷⁰ As a result, Swiss editors might not have regarded commercial interests as crucial because trade with China was insignificant compared to Swiss trade with European countries. This view is corroborated by an article that was published in the *NZZ*, in which an Italian observer was described as being capable of evaluating the situation in the Far East absolutely objectively because Italy had only very limited interests in China.⁷¹ Consequently, it could be argued that the level of economic interests in China was seen as decisive in whether or not a country was a good or a bad foreign power in China.

Yet, the question still remains as to why there was such an enormous discrepancy between official and media perceptions of Switzerland's participation in informal imperialism in China. The following paragraphs will demonstrate that Switzerland's participation in the unequal treaties clashed with traditional portrayals of Swiss values while anti-imperialism dovetailed with some of the most important values in the discursive construction of nationhood, namely democracy and neutrality.

Swiss criticism of the foreign powers' presence in China often focused on the absence of democracy in China, particularly the situation in Shanghai, as the following excerpt from the *NZZ* demonstrates:

Nobody will deny that a patriotic Chinese is justified in complaining that he is not in control of his own house, when in about twenty important seaports, it is foreign powers that really exercise government. Is there any wonder that the situation in Shanghai, for example, seems quite abnormal and unbearable to a Chinese when he sees that in this city, in which only 21,000 foreigners live next to half a million of Chinese, the government of the business quarter is really in the hands of six English, one Japanese, and two Americans? To a democrat as well as a nationalist, it has to be an open contradiction of the two most important basic principles of political justice that an industrial community like Shanghai is governed in this way by a comparatively small body of foreign taxpayers.⁷²

The article not only criticized the foreign concessions and the SMC as undemocratic, it also portrayed Swiss readers as democrats and nationalists, implying that the situation in China was contrary to Swiss values and behavior.

Unlike other national mythologies, Swiss national mythology does not center on a story of solidarity and nationalism caused by a shared ethnicity, language, or religion, because Switzerland is ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse. Instead, Swiss national mythology focuses on stories in which the Swiss Confederacy is threatened from the outside, forcing the Confederates to stick together and fight the foreign enemy. The Confederates are, thus, presented as a community of patriotic peasants and shepherds who courageously fought their foreign lords in order to form an independent, democratic

⁶⁸ Dejung and Zangger, "British Wartime Protectionism."

⁶⁹ Bairoch, "La Suisse," 105–108; and Tanner, "Die Schweiz und Europa," 409–410.

⁷⁰ Woodhead, *China Year Book 1928*, 4.

⁷¹ *NZZ*, July 9, 1925.

⁷² *NZZ*, July 5, 1925. See also *Journal de Genève*, July 13, 1925 and March 25, 1927; and *NZZ*, March 22, 1927.

nation. The founding myth of Switzerland is the Rütlichschwur, an oath that was supposedly taken in 1291 by three delegates from Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden on the meadow Rütli, where they swore loyalty to each other and promised to fight together against their overlords until they were free.⁷³ Similarly, Swiss national mythology celebrates heroes like Wilhelm Tell and Winkelried who personified Swiss opposition to foreign dominance and Switzerland's struggle for humanity and good against evil. Resistance against a foreign oppressor and the struggle for freedom were (and still are), therefore, central in nationalistic discourse.⁷⁴ As the Confederates were widely used in political arguments and national portrayals in the early twentieth century,⁷⁵ newspaper articles presenting the Chinese as resisting foreign oppression in the 1920s would have elicited strong sympathy among Swiss readers, whereas stories about Swiss involvement in imperialism would probably have caused a public outcry and could even have led to public pressure on the Swiss government to give up extraterritoriality in China.

Switzerland's conspicuous absence from the media's description of the imperial presence in China can also be explained by the importance of neutrality for the discursive construction of Swiss nationhood. Switzerland's small size, its important strategic location in Europe, and the various languages spoken there caused anxieties that Switzerland could be absorbed by another European power. Neutrality became the basis of Swiss foreign policy in 1815 and was commonly regarded as the main reason Switzerland had managed to remain a sovereign nation, particularly during the First World War. In the 1920s, neutrality occupied a central role in discursive constructs of Swiss national identity.⁷⁶ In 1920, for example, a plebiscite was held on whether or not Switzerland should join the League of Nations. The debate surrounding the plebiscite centered on the image of Switzerland as the promoter of peace among nations and on Swiss neutrality.⁷⁷ The Federal Government coined the concept of a "differential neutrality" to claim that Switzerland could join the League of Nations without compromising Swiss neutrality. However, opponents of Swiss membership in the League of Nations argued that it would compromise Swiss neutrality. They also warned that it would mark the end of Switzerland's military and political independence.⁷⁸ The heated debate surrounding the true nature of Swiss neutrality shows how important neutrality was for the concept of Swiss nationhood.

As a neutral country, Switzerland could not embark on colonial adventures. While the Swiss government had no qualms about obtaining extraterritoriality in China and thereby joining the signatory powers of the unequal treaties, the open endorsement of the unequal treaties or stories about Swiss complicity in informal imperialism in China were tricky issues that had to be handled with care by the media. The Swiss press tried to alleviate any suspicions some readers might have had about Switzerland's responsibility for or even culpability in the situation in China by focusing on neutrality. For example, the *Tages-Anzeiger* declared:

⁷³ Kreis, *Mythos Rütli*; and Sablonier, *Gründungszeit ohne Eidgenossen*.

⁷⁴ Wild, "Auf wen schoss Wilhelm Tell," 25–27; Imhof, "Sonderfallsdiskurse und Pfadabhängigkeit," 29–36.

⁷⁵ Marchal, *Schweizer Gebrauchsgeschichte*, 130–131.

⁷⁶ Widmer, *Die Schweiz als Sonderfall*, 134–141; Bonjour, "Geschichte der schweizerischen Aussenpolitik," 57–80; Rapold, *Der Schweizerische Generalstab*, 19–26, 121–180; Mittler, *Der Weg zum Ersten Weltkrieg*, 719–763; Kaestli, *Selbstbezogenheit und Offenheit*, 34–35; Langendorf and Streit, *Face à la guerre*, 132–138; and Im Hof, *Mythos Schweiz*, 184–185.

⁷⁷ Moos, "Ein Aufbruch," 48.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 50–55; and Kaestli, *Selbstbezogenheit und Offenheit*, 111–115, 121–124.

A general hatred of foreigners in China would have to develop before our compatriots could get hurt. The Swiss as citizens of a neutral microstate do not stand in the same relationship to China as the citizens of several major powers and therefore already have less at risk.⁷⁹

Although the *Tages-Anzeiger* inadvertently admitted involvement of Swiss nationals in the imperial networks in China, it used neutrality and Switzerland's small size to absolve Switzerland of any shameful collaboration with imperial powers and ignored the fact that Swiss nationals enjoyed the same privileges as nationals from the imperial nations. This view was also supported by the fact that no Swiss citizens were injured or killed in the disturbances.⁸⁰ Thus, references to Swiss commercial relations with China and their dependence upon Switzerland's legal status in China as a power with extraterritorial privileges were suppressed by the Swiss press because they would have contradicted the dominant national discourses of Swiss nationhood.

V. Conclusion

This article has analyzed the discrepancy between official and media perceptions in Switzerland in the 1920s of informal imperialism in China. It has shown that commercial relations were a crucial factor in those perceptions. Official relations with China in the 1920s were dominated by Switzerland's status as a treaty power and resulted in China's demands for treaty negotiation and Switzerland's refusal to negotiate. From the start, official relations were dominated by commercial interests. A Swiss mission was established in China because it was thought that this would improve Swiss trade with China. Both Swiss officials and business organizations were convinced that privileges such as extraterritoriality were crucial for Swiss trade with China. By the 1920s, Swiss merchants and companies were not only deeply immersed in the transnational commercial networks in China, but were also affected by events in China and participated socially as part of the colonial elite in China's treaty ports. Commercial relations with China were, therefore, deeply rooted in the social, economic, and political structures and processes created by informal imperialism in China.

Media reactions to the antiforeign agitation in China are interesting because Swiss newspapers and magazines across the political spectrum passionately criticized imperialism in China, particularly extraterritoriality and the system of foreign concessions, but they almost completely ignored Swiss participation in informal imperialism. Possible explanations for this reaction are the negligible importance attributed to Swiss trade with China and the increasing focus on the nationality of foreign companies in China rather than their transnational nature. However, national discourses were also crucial to this reaction because Swiss national mythology was based on anti-imperial narratives. Thus, press articles about Swiss participation in informal imperialism in China via privileges like extraterritoriality would have challenged traditional self-images of the Swiss as an inherently democratic and neutral nation. As any newspaper article about the nature of Swiss business in China would inevitably have included information about Switzerland's status as a treaty power in China and the fact that Swiss nationals enjoyed the same privileges as other nationals of treaty powers, Swiss complicity in informal imperialism could only be downplayed if Swiss commercial relations with China were completely ignored. This had the ironic consequence that, despite their insignificance for

⁷⁹ *Tages-Anzeiger*, June 26, 1925.

⁸⁰ *NZZ*, June 26, 1925.

overall Swiss trade, commercial relations with China were a very tricky business in the 1920s.

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